

Hatcher Pass Management Plan

Public Comments Summary

This summary is a compilation of the comments received from the public regarding the revision of the Hatcher Pass Management plan during the public comment period extending from April 28rd to June 5th, 2009. The initial phase of the public scoping process for this plan began in late March, 2009. The Department of Natural Resources, Division of Mining, Land, and Water, (DMLW) and the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DPOR), held four recreational use focus discussion meetings in March and April in both Anchorage and Wasilla. Two open forum public meetings were held in late April. Two focus group representative meetings were held in June and July.

The official public comment period end date was June 5, 2009, however we continue to receive comments regularly. The public has been able to submit their comments in a variety of ways. Public comment forms and questionnaires were provided to the public at each focus group and public meeting to fill out and submit in person or via mail. These documents were available on the Hatcher Pass Management Plan website to print and submit as well. An on-line public comment entry form was created for the website and the public was also provided with the email addresses of staff for direct communication regarding this plan revision.

Methods of Comment Submission and Quantity

The public scoping phase of this project has yielded nearly 350 comments to date. The Focus Group Meetings generated nearly 100 comments, and over 40 were received during the open forum public meetings. Also, 200 additional comments have been received via email, mail, and on-line comment entries.

Comment Themes

The majority of the public comments we received pertained to recreational use in the area, specifically winter use. The comments generally fell into 3 categories: Multi-Use, Motorized Use, and Non-Motorized Use, but most of the comments were split between for and against motorized recreational use. Although dog-sledding is popular in the area, there have been very few comments received that referred to dog-sledding. Off-Road and 4x4 recreation are very popular in the plan area during the summer, however there have not been very many comments regarding summer motorized use received from the motorized users to this point.

There were several common themes in the public comments. They included: confusion over land management authority, quality of existing maps, motorized access into and throughout the plan area, restrictions of motorized use, conflicting recreational uses, safety concerns, development in the Government Peak management unit, need for new facilities and parking lots. Overall, the public felt that new facilities and parking areas should be developed throughout the plan area. Many agreed that a small fee or permit system would be acceptable if the funding was allocated to the Department of Natural Resources for the management of recreation in the Hatcher Pass Management Plan area.

Confusion over Management Authority in the Hatcher Pass Plan Area

There were many members of the public who were confused about the management authority in the plan area and which government agency ultimately had authority over the area. Many people thought that the Hatcher Pass Management Plan area was a state park. Most of the land within the Hatcher Pass area is Title 38, General State Land which allows motorized use and it is not a state park. Much of the east side of the plan area is managed by DPOR through an inter-agency plan agreement with DMLW. The Mat-Su Borough owns portions of the Government Peak Management Unit and is responsible for management of that area and the development of an alpine ski facility. The Mat-Su Borough plans to develop both an Alpine Ski Resort and Nordic Ski Center on their land. The public was also confused about the authority of management plan recommendations and the actual management implementations.

The public has requested that the management authority of the area be clearly defined in this plan revision and depicted on a map.

The public has requested some form of notification about what recommendations actually get implemented and which do not.

- The 1986 Plan and 1989 Plan Amendment boundaries and depiction of non-motorized areas conflict with the actual regulations passed in October 2002 and this has created confusion as to what uses are allowed.

Mapping and Management Unit Boundaries

The public expressed concern about the accuracy and inconsistency of the maps available for the area. The maps depicted in the 1986 Plan and 1989 Plan Amendment were not very detailed and the management unit boundaries are difficult to discern on the ground. Since allowable uses vary in each management unit, motorized users could not easily discern where they were permitted to recreate. Further, maps that were provided to them by DPOR that depicted areas open and closed to motorized use in the winter conflicted with the use areas depicted on the plan maps.

The public recommended the following suggestions regarding mapping:

- Maps need to be more detailed and easy to read with clear labels.
- Management Unit boundaries should follow topography and landmarks.
- Areas restricted to non-motorized use should follow topography and landmarks.
- More signage is needed so motorized users know where they can and cannot recreate
- The plan boundary should be extended to the Kashwitna River.

Motorized Access into the Plan Area

The public expressed concern regarding traffic congestion on the roads and in parking areas. The western management units provide the largest open areas to motorized use within the plan area. Currently, there are only two main roads into the plan area: The Wasilla-Fishhook Road and the Willow-Fishhook Road, which allow for eastern and western access into the plan area, respectively. There are also three RS 2477 trails that allow access into the plan area located in the southwest, northwest, and northeast boundaries of the plan area. Currently, these roads are not paved or well-maintained.

The public recommended the following regarding motorized access:

- A new motorized corridor along the Wasilla-Fishhook Creek Road
- A new motorized corridor across the borough owned land in the Government Peak Management Unit
- Corridors utilizing existing local roads and RS 2477 Trails
 - Edgerton Parks Road and Carle Wagon Road
- Continued motorized access for hunting and recreation purposes through the Government Peak area after the Nordic Ski Area and Alpine Ski Resort have been constructed

Recreational Use Designated Areas

Many of the comments received focused on either limiting or expanding motorized recreational use within the boundaries of the Hatcher Pass Management Plan Area. Most of these comments and recommendations pertained to winter use. Many of the people who commented about conflicting recreational uses referred to areas around the main road corridor. Suggestions included the following:

Comments in favor of motorized use included:

- Recommendations for opening areas that are currently closed to motorized use, including Reed Lakes and Government Peak
- Recommendations for creation of well-marked motorized corridors, including corridors along the Archangel Road and Reed Creek Road.
- Recommendations for trading lands that are currently open to motorized use for lands which are currently designated as non-motorized, specifically the Reed Lakes area and Marmot Mountain area
- Request for areas designated for motorized use only
- Some motorized users stated that they will continue to go where they want to regardless of map or land designation because it is all state land.

Those in favor of non-motorized use and a decrease in motorized access statements included:

- Recommendations for splitting management plan area according to recreational use
 - East Side: Non-Motorized
 - West Side: Motorized
 - Designate the East Side as a State Park
- Recommendations for closing Marmot Mountain Area
 - Safety Concerns due to snow machine speed and high marking
 - Aesthetic values and experience
- Recommendations for closing 16-Mile Triangle area
 - Safety Concerns due to snow machine speed and high marking
 - Sledding and Snow-boarding take place there
- Recommendations for closure of land surrounding Mountaineering huts.

- Huts were created by/for the mountaineering community, not as snow machine rest-stops or storage units.
- Safety of property
- Protection of Habitat Areas and Scenic Corridors
 - Bald Mountain Habitat Area has been being used as an off-road recreational area
- Do not create motorized corridors, as motorized users do not stay on them.
- Better enforcement of non-motorized restrictions
 - Safety concerns due to high speeds of snow-machiners and high marking
 - Destruction of soils, wildlife, and plants by ATV's and off-road use
- General feeling that snow machines and ATV's are dangerous, loud, and smell badly,.

Government Peak Unit

Many members of the public had confusion about the management authority of the land within the Government Peak Management Unit. The Mat-Su Borough owns land in the eastern, southeastern and south central area of the management unit. The borough intends to construct two skiing recreational facilities on this land: an Alpine Ski Area in the north eastern area of the unit and a Nordic Ski Center in the southern area of the management unit. There were concerns raised by all recreational users regarding the development of the two facilities.

- Non-Motorized users, primarily back-country skiers, were concerned that their use of the area would be prohibited because it was not related to the alpine ski facility.
- Motorized users were concerned that they would not have any access through the Government Peak into the rest of the Hatcher Pass Area, which would curtail their proposals for corridors
- Hunters who used motorized transportation were concerned that they would no longer be able to hunt there.

General Improvement Requests

There was a general consensus about what improvements should be made to the Hatcher Pass Management Plan area. Recreational users of all types commonly referred to the following:

- The area should be designated as a park
- More rangers and staff are needed to manage the area due to volume of use.
- More parking areas
- Better road maintenance and trail grooming
- More Restroom facilities
- Establish a fee station or permitting system to fund area improvements
- There were comments for and against paving roads

Other Issues

Other than recreational use types and related facilities and Government Peak development, there were not many concerns raised. There were a few people who asked about the potential development of a hydro-electric power plant in the plan area. They expressed concern about the effect it would have on the wildlife and scenic values of the area. At this time however, a plan for a hydroelectric plant has not been finalized.

Public Comments by Existing Management Unit

Management Unit	Related Comments
Willow Mountain (WMU)	The WMU is used primarily for motorized recreation and hunting. There were no major concerns raised about this management unit other than to keep it open to motorized recreational use.
Lucky Shot Ridge / Baldy North (LS/BNU)	<p>The LS/BNU is used primarily for motorized recreation and hunting. Motorized use in this unit is concentrated in the Summer, rather than winter. It is popular for 4X4 and off-roading.</p> <p>The public expressed a need for enforcement of the non-motorized restrictions in the Bald Mountain Habitat Area and public education about the allowances of RS 2477 trails. An RS 2477 Trail runs through the habitat area. RS 2477 Trails serve as a right of way through public and private land. However, their existing location does not mean that the area surrounding the trail is open to motorized use. Members of the public had incorrectly thought that since there was an RS 2477 Trail in the area, it meant the surrounding land was open to motorized use regardless of land designation.</p>
Willow Creek / Craigie Creek Unit (WC/CCU)	The WC/CCU is primarily used for motorized recreation. There were no major concerns raised about this management unit other than requests to keep the area open to motorized recreational use.
Hillside (HU)	The HU is primarily for motorized recreation and hunting. Motorized use in this unit is concentrated in the Summer, rather than winter. It is popular for 4X4 and off-roading. An RS 2477 serves as an access road into the HPMP area. There were no major concerns raised about this management unit, other than requests to keep the area open to motorized access.
Government Peak (GPU)	<p>The GPU is primarily used for non-motorized recreation, although motorized recreational use and hunting does take place in the unit. The management unit falls under a combination of DNR, DPOR and Mat-Su Borough management. Motorized use is currently restricted by DPOR. Non-Motorized users want the management unit to remain closed to motorized use and would prefer no motorized access corridors because they feel they are not followed.</p> <p>The current boundaries of this Government Peak Unit include the Gold Mint Trailhead parking lot and 16-Mile Triangle, bordered by the Palmer-Fishhook Road (main road). Many comments were made about overcrowding at the parking lot and lack of motorized corridors thru the non-motorized Hatcher Pass Special Use Area. The 16-Mile triangle is a popular recreational area for all winter recreational uses. Members of the public expressed concern about the safety in reference to snow machine speed and high marking taking place in the same locations as families sled riding.</p> <p>Many concerns were raised about the impending development of two ski facilities by the borough. Motorized users would like the unit opened to motorized recreation and to have two corridors for access into the plan area. They would like a north-south corridor along the Palmer-Fishhook Creek Road and a new east – west corridor across the south central area of the unit, on land owned by the borough. Skiers were concerned about the potential effects the development of ski facilities would have on their recreational use in the area and feel it should be closed to motorized recreational use.</p>
Independence (IU)	<p>The IU includes the Independence State Historic Park. The unit is used for recreation, mining, and has private properties on it. There is a parking area in this unit. Most of the unit is restricted to motorized use by DPOR and state regulation.</p> <p>Many non-motorized users raised concerns were raised about conflicting use and safety concerns in the southern and eastern sections of this unit, specifically along the main road corridor and Marmot Mountain area. Non-Motorized users expressed concern about snow machine speed and high-marking. All users expressed concern about the over-crowding in the parking lot.</p>
Archangel (AU)	The AU is used primarily for recreation. It is currently open to motorized use. The Archangel Road leads to the center of the unit, where a popular trail begins. Concerns over conflicting recreational uses were raised about this unit. The concerns were generally raised by non-motorized users who cited safety concerns, overcrowded parking areas, congestion along the main road corridor and Archangel Road.

Management Unit	Related Comments
	There were recommendations to create a motorized corridor for snow machines along the western side of the Archangel Road to redirect motorized traffic away from the closed section of the Reed Lakes Unit. There was also a recommendation to open the section of the Hatcher Pass Special Use Area located in the Reed Lakes Unit to motorized use, and close the Marmot Mountain area located within the Independence Mine and Archangel Units to motorized use.
Reed Lakes (RLU)	<p>The RLU is primarily used for non-motorized recreation. The western half of this unit contains the western wing of the Hatcher Pass Special Use Area (HP SUA), which is closed to motorized use through state regulation.</p> <p>Concerns were raised about the motorized recreational use taking place in restricted areas, parking congestion, and use conflict along the main road. Motorized users expressed frustration about not being able to use this area and having to travel far north to get around the closed area. Motorized users would like a corridor through the HP SUA if they cannot have the entire area opened.</p>
Little Susitna (LSU)	<p>The LSU is primarily used for recreation. The eastern wing of the non-motorized Hatcher Pass Special Use Area is located along the western border of this management unit.</p> <p>Concerns were raised about the motorized recreational use taking place in restricted areas, and use conflict along the main road. Motorized users expressed frustration about not being able to use this area and having to travel far north to get around the closed area. Many admitted to ignoring the restriction and traveling up the Little Susitna River Valley on their snow machines.</p> <p>There is a mountaineering hut located near Mint Glacier, within the HP SUA. Members of the mountaineering community have expressed concern over trespass issues taking place in this hut, in addition to three other huts that are located north and east of the current plan area. They have requested stronger enforcement of non-motorized use restrictions in this unit in order to protect their property. They have also requested protection from trespass on the huts located in land surrounding the current management plan boundaries.</p>

Proposals and Recommendations by Existing Management Unit:

Management Unit	Related Comments
Willow Mountain (WMU)	<p>This management unit should be retained as Title 38 General State Land with a recreational use management focus. There appears to be no need to further regulate recreational use in the area. Although there is a critical habitat area located along the western border of this unit, it is closed to motorized use during the summer and most of the recreational use takes place in the winter.</p> <p>Although the Willow Community has not forwarded their official comments yet, the comments that have been received indicate that their recommendations would be for trail heads, camp sites, and related facilities and do not refer to the need for recreational use regulations.</p>
Lucky Shot Ridge / Baldy North (LS/BNU)	<p>This management unit should be retained as Title 38 General State Land with a recreational use management focus, with the exception of the Bald Mountain Habitat Area. Motorized use restrictions should be enforced in this area since this area is closed by state regulation to protect the bird population and tundra. Since most of the motorized recreational use in this unit takes place in the summer via 4 x 4, off-roading, and ATV's, there has been degradation to the environment. The public should also be informed about the restrictions and functions of RS 2477 Trails.</p>
Willow Creek / Craigie Creek Unit (WC/CCU)	<p>This management unit should be retained as Title 38 General State Land with a recreational use management focus. There appears to be no need to further regulate recreational use in the area.</p>
Hillside (HU)	<p>This management unit should be retained as Title 38 General State Land with a recreational use management focus. There appears to be no need to further regulate recreational use in the area. However, the public should be reminded about the restrictions and functions of RS 2477 Trails. The boundaries of this management unit should be updated to follow topographical features and landmarks. It may be appropriate to combine with the Baldy North Unit.</p>
Government Peak (GPU)	<p>This management unit should be retained for recreational use, with non-motorized areas. Particularly those areas along the road corridor and Government Peak. Since much of the popular land is owned by the Mat-Su Borough and is pending development, designations of certain areas may need to be postponed.</p> <p>It would be appropriate to remove the 16-Mile Triangle from this management unit and create an additional management unit for that area.</p>
Independence (IU)	<p>This management unit should be retained for recreational use, with non-motorized areas. Specifically those areas along the road and Marmot Mountain.</p>
Archangel (AU)	<p>This management unit should be retained for recreational use, with specified non-motorized areas. Particularly, those areas along the road and Marmot Mountain. A road corridor along the Archangel road and additional parking may help to alleviate some of the conflicting use and overcrowding that occurs in that area. If a motorized corridor is established it should be well marked and enforced.</p>
Reed Lakes (RLU)	<p>This management unit should be retained for recreational use, with specified non-motorized areas. Particularly those areas along the road and Marmot Mountain. It may be appropriate to open sections of the HP SUA to motorized recreational use however, it may be more appropriate to establish motorized corridors through those areas. Motorized corridors should be well marked and enforced.</p>
Little Susitna (LSU)	<p>This management unit should be retained for recreational use, with specified non-motorized areas. It may be appropriate to open sections of the HP SUA to motorized recreational use however, it may be more appropriate to establish motorized corridors through those areas. Motorized corridors should be well marked and enforced.</p>

General Recommendations

The following are the principle recommendations suggested by the public in their comments:

Confusion Over Management Authority in the Hatcher Pass Plan Area

The Hatcher Pass Management Plan area should be managed primarily for recreational use. The public has illustrated they are confused about the management authority of the area, since there are several different types of land designations and management authorities within the plan area. A discussion of these issues should be addressed in the plan revision.

Mapping and Management Unit Boundaries

All management units need to be updated to follow topographical features and landmarks wherever possible. Areas of highly concentrated use (16-Mile Triangle), should be established as their own unit. Discernable boundaries will help members of the public determine their locations and their allowable uses. It will also help staff when adjudicating land decisions and enforcement by park rangers. The boundary of the plan area should be extended north to the Kashwitna River and should encompass the mountaineering huts. The mountaineering huts should have some type of motorized access restriction to preserve their function.

Motorized Access into the Plan Area

There should be an additional access route from the southern boundary of the plan area. The main road entries are from the Palmer-Fishhook Creek Road to the south east, which transitions into the Willow-Fishhook Creek to the west. And there is an RS 2477 from the southwest, (which crosses a habitat area). Satellite imagery shows the existence of other unofficial routes. A suggestion for a corridor immediately east of the Palmer-Fishhook Creek Road may not be a safe location. Since the Mat-Su Borough intends to construct a road into the southern section of this unit for the Nordic Ski Center, it may be possible to combine road corridor construction with their project. There are several RS 2477 Trails located within the management plan area. A description of the purpose and function of RS 2477 Trails should be included in the plan revision.

Recreational Use Designated Areas

It is not possible to close the entire plan area to motorized use or to swiftly designate it as a state park. It is also not possible to split the area into two sections. pening areas that are currently closed to motorized use should be done very cautiously. Well placed, well-marked road corridors may be a better solution than opening restricted areas. Certain areas, like Marmot Mountain and the 16-Mile Triangle should have motorized use restrictions based on public safety needs.

If possible, establishing an area designated for motorized recreational use may help to balance any feelings that land was lost or gained by recreational user groups. The area in the north-east Baldy Hillside Unit or southern area of the Craigie Creek Unit may be suitable for this purpose.

Government Peak Unit

The plan should address the recreational use restrictions that may take place once the borough has developed the ski facilities. The development plan has not been finalized yet, which may postpone the inclusion of this information in the plan and may have to be amended later.

General Improvement Requests and Other Issues

The public overwhelmingly agreed that more parking and related facilities were needed and additional park ranger staff. If possible, a fee or permit system should be implemented in the area to assist in payment for the improvements and additional staff if possible. Further study into the effects that a proposed hydroelectric plant project would have on the area needs to be reviewed and conveyed to the public.